THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

When You Pray, Say...Save Us From the Time of Trial and Deliver Us From Evil

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I thought I could acquire faith by endeavoring to lead what might be termed a holy life. Later I discovered, and am discovering to this day, that one can acquire faith only by leading an entirely worldly, as opposed to other-worldly life. By worldliness I mean living amid the world's abundance of duties and problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities - if we do that, we cast ourselves completely into the arms of God: we take seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in this world; and we share Christ's vigil in Gethsemane. That, I believe, is faith, and that is how one becomes a human being and a Christian. I'm thankful to have recognized this, and I know I could only have done so on the road I have traveled.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Love Letters From Cell 92
July 21, 1944

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WHEN YOU PRAY, SAY... SAVE US FROM THE TIME OF TRIAL AND DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Luke 19:28-40

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Startle us by your entry this day to the city long ago and our city today, our lives, our hearts and souls. Come, be among us. In this time together open our spirits to your love and grace, your high hopes and expectations for us. Speak your word to us and as we hear, give us courage to respond in lives of faithful commitment, following wherever our Lord Jesus Christ leads us. Amen.

* * *

One time, months – perhaps a year or two earlier, his disciples asked him to teach them to pray. This is how he answered:

> "When you pray, say …
>
> Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
> Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
> Give us today our daily bread.
> Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
> Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil."

We learned it as children, and the way we learned it was "lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil."

I grew up thinking that when I prayed "lead us not into temptation," what I was asking God for was a little assistance in avoiding doing or seeing some pretty interesting things. "O God, lead me not past the cookie jar one more time where the chocolate chip cookies are waiting and my mother has told me to stay away…. O God, lead me not past my Captain Marvel comic books when I told my parents I was going to my room to work on my algebra…. O God, keep me from dreams of freshly cut outfield grass and the crack of the bat while Reverend Graham is praying fervently on and on for peace in the world…. Lead me not to the magazine rack in the drug store where there are pictures I shouldn't be seeing…. And, O Lord, lead me not up to Rush Street."

And so I was glad to learn that the way popular piety has moralized the idea of temptation misses the point and that while it may be a good and healthy idea to avoid the carnality and calories which are the content of temptation, Jesus had something much more powerful and critical in mind.

One of the best chapters in Norman Mailer's book *The Gospel According to The Son* describes Jesus' experience of temptation and testing. Mailer writes in the first person, presuming to speak in Jesus' own voice. The testing happened in the wilderness, shortly after Jesus had decided to devote his life to God.

"The visitor soon arrived. And he was handsome as a prince. He had a gold ornament on a gold chain. And the hair of this prince was as long as my own and lustrous. He was dressed in robes of velvet that were as purple as the late evening. He had climbed the mountain, yet there was no dust on his robes nor sweat on his skin. I said to myself, 'The Devil is the most beautiful creature God ever made.'

"His first words were: 'Do you know how the prophet Isaiah met his death?'

"I was overcome with silence. So I was obliged to listen as he said: 'Isaiah was killed by a Jewish King, the pagan Manasseh...' He held up a finger and spoke again. 'This Manasseh, wishing to destroy the religion of his fathers, sent out a royal order that Isaiah was to be uprooted from his home in the city and hunted like an animal. Isaiah fled and the soldiers of Manasseh set out after him into the wilderness.'

"'This sanctuary,' said the Devil, 'he found in a stout oak with a rotten center and he placed himself inside it. But the officers of Manasseh discovered where he was hiding and brought a great saw to the tree and cut it in half.... Did you know?'

"Whereupon he laughed. I felt weakened by this story more than any deprivation of the fast." [p. 45, 46]

There are powerful issues of life and death here; issues of his humanity and ours confronted with difficult choices: issues which come sharply into focus as we remember and reflect on the events of the day we call Palm Sunday.

"Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil" is not about petty moralism, calories and risqué pictures. It is about Good Friday and the cross. It is, I think, far better translated: "Save us from the time of trial." It is, I think, Jesus looking ahead and expressing his understandable and familiar-to-most-of-us hope that he will not be put to the ultimate test for his faith, that he will be spared the necessity of deciding to be faithful at the cost of his life. It is, I believe, Jesus looking forward to the future his followers would suffer later, a future of persecution and official hostility.

"Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil." To the early Christian church which prayed those words in a world very different from ours, they meant "save us from the Coliseum, the lions, the torture, the flames. Save us from having to watch our parents, our children, our wives, our husbands, die."

Do you ever, on occasion, see a picture of martyrdom or hear a story and wonder for a moment what you would do? A friend of mine by the name of Syngman Rhee, born in North Korea, remembers the day his father, a distinguished Presbyterian, was arrested and marched to the town square with a group of Christians, and shot. "Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil."

For the early Christian church, evil personified was the political state, the Rome of classic architecture and literature, the Rome of civic order and peace, the Rome of arrogant and absolute power, Rome which could not and did not tolerate their faith in Jesus Christ and did everything it could to wipe them from the face of the earth. That's what they meant by evil, and the time of trial

from which they prayed to be saved was the necessity of deciding to be true to their faith, true to one another, true to themselves, when it cost them their lives.

Palm Sunday, I have always thought, was the beginning of his time of trial. Surely he was tempted not to go to Jerusalem for the Passover. Galilee, his home, is a long way away and not just in miles. Galilee is green, pleasant, rolling hills, a beautiful lake, dotted with small villages. There are fish to eat, bread and wine, small synagogues in each village and not much evidence of Roman presence and oppression. Occasionally Pharisees from Jerusalem might travel through Galilee and every now and then battalions of Roman soldiers from the garrison at Caesarea Philippi, but it is not much, actually. Galilee is a good place to be. His friends live there, his family, now his followers. Why would you go to Jerusalem for the Passover? His Galileean friends are bragging and making extravagant claims about him – that he is God's anointed. Some are whispering that he is the Messiah, God's son. In Jerusalem, under the noses of the guardians of religious orthodoxy, those claims sounded like blasphemy. In Jerusalem, where Roman presence and power are dominant, claims like that sound like sedition, treason. So why not celebrate the Passover at home? Why go to Jerusalem?

I think Jesus struggled with it, was tempted not to go. I think he listened when reasonable friends argued that he could do more from Capernaum in Galilee as a live teacher than from Jerusalem as an arrested or dead martyr. I do not think Jesus was any more eager to suffer and die than you and I are.

Sometimes we miss the humanness of his journey. Again, popular piety shields us from the truth. One of the most powerful and poignant incidents in the story is his time in the garden of Gethsemane after the Last Supper and just before his arrest. The account tells us that it was a time of pain and agony: that he begged God to deliver him from what clearly was ahead, that he sweat great drops of blood.

The image of that event with which we all are most familiar, is a nineteenth century painting by Heinrich Hoffman, *Christ in Gethsemane*. "Jesus kneels before a large rock. The landscaping is exquisite. Jesus' relaxed attitude suggests he might as well be in his own backyard. His hands are clasped, but not in anguish and tension – he has already discerned that it is (God's) will, that the cup will not pass from him.... This does not disturb him however; nor should it disturb us." [Richard Dietrich, *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 1998]

I think Jesus was tempted not to go. But then, when he did go, when the crowds of pilgrims recognized him and responded predictably, I believe, he experienced another temptation or trial: the temptation of triumphalism. The city was crowded with religious pilgrims who had come from all over the country to be in Jerusalem for the Passover. The event itself recalls and celebrates Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery. It was a patriotic occasion when the kingdom, the monarchy, the nation's independence under God was celebrated. And so it was a volatile situation in Jerusalem each year at Passover. The Roman garrison was augmented with troops from around the country. The governor moved to Jerusalem to be on hand. The religious authorities scanned the crowds for trouble-makers because they did not want to disturb the fine and balanced accommodation they had reached with the Romans which allowed them a degree of autonomy. The last thing the Chief Priest

and his advisors needed was a radical peasant from Galilee claiming to be the Messiah and crowds of peasants clamoring to install him as a new king.

New Testament scholars tell us that what he did and the way he did it was a clear "messianic gesture." [N. T. Wright, *Jesus, The Victory of God*]

The prophet Zechariah had predicted that the Messiah, the King, would come to Jerusalem riding on a donkey. And so, when the crowds saw it, they recognized immediately what was happening and pulled palm branches from the trees and the coats from their backs and laid them on the road – the traditional way one welcomes royalty.

Did he not think about what they were saying? Was he not flattered by the adulation of the crowd? Did he not consider allowing them to crown him king? Did he not consider rallying Judas and his zealot friends, already armed, already engaged in a guerilla war with the Romans? Did he not consider, in the name of King David, and his people, in the name of God, storming the fortress and killing the hated Gentile oppressors and establishing once again the monarchy, royalty, God's true son on earth? Of course he did. Jesus, because he was human, flirted at least with triumphalism, success, victory.

Those two temptations have always presented themselves to his people.

He considered staying in Galilee, away from the city and that has always been the greatest temptation for his church, to retreat from the world, to become a haven from the harsh realities of the world. The temptation is strong. The life we live in the world is full of ambiguity and compromise. Six days a week we deal with greed, sex, power, politics, violence, corruption. Can't we have a little rest from all of that? Can't we carve out a space in our lives, a sanctuary from all that? And so religion that focuses on my personal salvation, my personal experience of God, my personal spiritual journey, sounds pretty good.

Or a religion that focuses on itself, that spends its best energy on doctrinal orthodoxy, on issues of polity and order, on defining the boundaries between those of us inside and the world out there, sounds comfortable and secure and attractive.

I was meeting with a group of Presbyterians in Tulsa on Wednesday and the talk turned, as it always does these days, to everyone's favorite topic, sex, and who can be ordained and who must not be ordained. I was asked, again, to articulate my position, which I did, for the thousandth time, saying again that I believe local congregations are best able to listen to the Spirit and to elect and ordain responsible and faithful leaders and that sexual orientation per se has not been and should not be a barrier. A man said, "But don't we have to draw a line somewhere? Inclusivity is fine, but, (the definition of the word "but," by the way, is – disregard what I just said, here comes what I really mean") – inclusivity is fine, but don't we have to have boundaries?" I told him what someone told me recently, namely, that an inclusive church isn't for everybody. But what I thought about saying and didn't, was that, no, we don't need to draw lines in the sand and no, we probably don't need boundaries between us and the world so much as we need bridges and doors and windows. No, maybe we don't need to be so careful about who gets in or who gets ordained and a lot more concerned about the radical inclusivity of his love and his hospitality and welcome to all who wanted

to be near him. Maybe we need to stop worrying so much about keeping ourselves apart from the ambiguities of life and of this difficult question, and worry a lot more about how to follow him faithfully and courageously into the very heart of the city.

William Sloan Coffin said that the biggest problem with the church is not that its doctrine isn't orthodox or its morality pure, but that its love is inadequate.

What would happen, I wonder, if we called a meeting and instead of talking about sex, discussed how to love the world more effectively. I wonder if anyone would come. I wonder what would happen if just the Presbyterian Church decided to stop trying to draw lines in the sand and build boundaries and preserve our own purity and instead decided to commit our energy, imagination, intelligence, love and resources to the health and safety and education of the children in this city – risked getting hands dirty to show his love.

It is tempting to stay in Galilee, however. And just as he must have considered at least seizing the opportunity and institutionalizing his messiahship by reestablishing and then reclaiming the throne of David, so I think you and I are inclined to want from our religion, success, strength, a muscular God whose greatness is reflected in the worldly dominance of God's people.

We're still inclined to measure success numerically. How many members do you have and what's your budget are the criteria by which we measure one another. And behind that mentality is a theology which is not only seriously flawed but radically incongruent with the events of this day. This day Jesus resisted the temptation of greatness by the world's standards.

The symbol of Christianity, someone noted, is not a coat of arms, but a cross. Theologian William Placher, who teaches at Wabash College, penetrates to the heart of the matter.

> "Most people – whether or not they believe – assume they know what the word 'God' means. God is all-powerful, like a king, an absolute monarch. To read the biblical narrative is to encounter a God who is, first of all, love. Love involves a willingness to put oneself at risk, and God is, in fact, vulnerable in love, vulnerable even to great suffering." [*Narratives of a Vulnerable God*]

This day Jesus decided to love instead of reign. On Palm Sunday Jesus decided that risking his own life, being vulnerable, was more what God wanted of him than success or power or authority.

And so the church, this and every church, will be measured, not by its strength and size, but by how much it risked for love: how vulnerable it was willing to be for the sake of its Lord.

I cannot think of Palm Sunday without thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated 30 years ago when he came to the city to talk about justice and equality and peace and God's love. I cannot think of Palm Sunday without thinking about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor and theologian, whose career and life was interrupted by the rise of National Socialism and the Third Reich in the 1930s. Bonhoeffer was a pacifist, but an early resister to Nazism. He was also a scholar of growing international reputation. Invited to study and teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York City by the distinguished theologian, Reinhold Neibuhr, Bonhoeffer was

pleasantly established in Morningside Heights in 1939 and urged by all to stay, to teach and influence a generation of students from the safety of a Manhattan classroom. Instead he decided to return to Germany and to be with his people through whatever would lay ahead. His resistance to Nazism deepened and he went to work for the German government as a double agent and helped plan the attempt on Hitler's life. He was arrested by the Gestapo and when the assassination attempt failed and the list of conspirators was discovered, his name was on it, his fate was sealed. On that day, July 21, 1944, he wrote his fiancé from cell 92...

> "One can acquire faith only by leading an entirely worldly life.... If we do that, if we cast ourselves completely into the arms of God – we share Christ's vigil in Gethsemane. That, I believe, is faith and that is how one becomes a Christian and a human being. I'm thankful to have recognized this and I know that I could only have done so on the road I have traveled." [*Love Letters From Cell 92*, p. 259]

Fifty-three years ago next week, April 9th, Bonhoeffer was executed.

The most important question for you and me is how shall we live whatever of life is left for us?

On this day you are invited to answer that question by following Jesus Christ. On this day you are invited to crown him king in your heart and then to follow along behind as he walks from Galilee to Jerusalem, from safety to commitment, from security to the risks of love.

On this day, we are invited to follow as he welcomes the outcast, as he includes into his fellowship those who are excluded, as he cradles the children and touches the leper, as he makes himself vulnerable for love.

"Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil," he taught his disciples to pray.

He's leading now. He is confronting with magnificent courage his personal time of trial. He is overcoming everything that threatens us. He is moving steadily toward his destiny which will be forever his gift of love to us and our salvation.

Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Amen.